DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 810 SP 016 409

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TITLE Parent Power: Assertive Training as a Tool For Obtaining Services for Exceptional Children.
PUB DATE Jan 78
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the State Convention of the Alabama Association of Children With Learning Disabilities (Montgomery, AL, January 26-28, 1978).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression: *Assertiveness: Communication Skills: Elementary Secondary Education: Exceptional Persons: *Interpersonal Competence: *Parent Attitudes: Parent Participation: *Parent School Relationship: *Power Structure: Self Concept: Special Education: Students

ABSTRACT

Methods of effective communication between parents and school authorities are discussed with particular emphasis on the need for controlled assertiveness in dealing with specific goals. The example is given of initiating and sustaining a dialog between parent and school on the immediate need for testing a learning disabled child. The right of the parent to request cooperation from the school is pointed out, and the reasons some parents hesitate to assert this right are discussed. A guide outlining progressive steps that will achieve a significant dialog is presented. (JD)

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PARENT POWER:

ASSERTIVE TRAINING AS A TOOL FOR OBTAINING SERVICES FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

A Speech delivered at the
Alabama Association of Children
With Learning Disabilities State Convention
Jan. 26-28, 1978
Governor's House Motel
Montgomery, Alabama

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ASSERTIVE TRAINING AS A TOOL
FOR OBTAINING SERVICES FOR
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Everyone within a school system works for and is responsible to someone else. In this hierarchy children are at the bottom, school board members at the top and other school personnel distributed randomly between those rungs. This structure has been reinforced by established channels through which inquiries, requests and complaints must progress so that, the system suggests, change will occur. Following this prescribed route, concerned educators have traced and retraced their steps without much evidence of success. Their tactic has been to perseverate, to wear the opposition down by sheer tenacity; however, the wearing down has not been in the intended direction. Teachers and counselors have forgotten that parents, as voters and taxpayers, are the employers to whom school staffs, especially school boards, are accountable. Parents need to know they are actually, but possibly only collectively, the uppermost rung of the school hierarchy.

Most organizations have established visible decision-making path ways: the author suggests that a constructive utilization of an almost invisible component in the school structure assertive parent power, would prove to be a time, energy and temper saving undertaking.

Several factors have kept parents out of the schools. The first is the myth, fortified or instigated by society, that only educators are qualified to determine the needs of students. Declining academic achievement for the so-called normal child indicates that this

assumption is not necessarily true. Power, associated with the role of administrators who establish the educational environment, is often over-extended to the exclusion of those truly responsible for children, their parents. Power is legitimate and necessary to the maintenance of our social structure and traditionally lodged in those roles where a superior/subordinate relationship is visible or where legal and moral responsibilities exist. The average parents' perception of the educator's role as superior and the educators' presumption that the parental role is subordinate within the school setting may have created a situation in which the parents' potential role in education is not recognized. Parents and educators do occupy different roles; however, these roles are not unequal. Nor does responsibility for education rest more heavily on one group than the other. The argument about who is at fault when children fail to learn diverts energy which could be better utilized.

Even in the more progressive school districts, parent power and role descriptions are restricted to an advisory capacity with final decisions made by school authorities. Those parents who participate in school interactions are apt to be the more vocal, better educated, daytime employees who have time to spend in evening meetings and late afternoon conferences. Families with two working parents, single parents, or blue collar employees engaged in shift work do not have access to their children's schools and must rely on newsletters, report cards and word-of-mouth information. Non-English speaking parents and those whose race and culture differ from the white majority are also penalized. These parents then comprise a large body of untapped potential

as change agents even though their time clocks, of necessity, run counter to the school's schedules. And these parents whose time is at a premium, need to discover ways to participate successfully in their children's education.

Many parents, regardless of education and socio-economic level, are hesitant to participate in school matters. To grow up believing that in the teacher's grade book resides an awesome potential for reward or punishment is to reach maturity as a parent with little or no inclination to resume old battle lines. Just as mature people, visiting their parents' homes, can find themselves reacting to their mothers and fathers with emotional and behavioral responses reminiscent of their teenage period, so parents called into a school setting can become students of, rather than peers with, their childrens' teachers. This is especially true when the socio-economic level and educational achievements are diverse.

This over-extension of power by educators, coupled with the low status afforded to parents, has had an especially diliterious effect on children with special needs. Parents, intimidated by established procedures, are often ineffectual in requesting legitimate services for their children. Parental defensiveness (a resumption of their own student behaviors) continues to elicit habituated responses from educators so that communication is minimal, cooperation reluctant or non-existent, and school community relations hostile. Defensive parents, wearied by their pursuit of help for their children, have not been taught how to constructively circumvent those educators and authorities whose first priority is something other than to meet the

educational needs of the exceptional child. This defensiveness has kept parents isolated from the schools, and, more importantly, from their children's education.

Now that Federal Law 94-142 requires that schools provide for the special educational needs of children, actual procurement of services still rests in large part upon parents' ability to assert themselves to educators in an effective way. A law, however beautifully worded, is only an invitation to action, not a guarantee of success.

The Alabama Developmental Disability Advocacy Program, based in Tuscaloosa, has developed several papers for parents to use as guidelines when seeking help for their children. These statements are included in your packet and we will proceed from discovering parental and children's rights to learn a facilitative manner of communicating with others about Individualized Education Programs (the IEP). This learning will be accomplished by groups of parents such as this which has bonds established by their childrens needs and cemented by their learning together to meet those needs.

According to the Office of the Attorney General of Alabama, schools may not use the excuse of budgetary limitations to withhold services from children. Violators will be prosecuted, according to the wording of the Alabama Exceptional Child Education Act. This is indeed heartening to parents but perhaps we should consider communication approaches that do not utilize this weapon as either the initial or singular approach to the procurement of educational services.

Lange and Jakobowski describe a style of assertiveness which might be used by parents as they seek the cooperation of school officials. In their book, Responsible Assertive Behavior (1977), these authors suggest that situations could be analyzed so that each individual's rights are recognized prior to a planned interaction so as to enable the initiator (parents) to make requests in the most successful but least antagonizing way. Assertiveness is thought of in ascending levels (degrees of intensity) with the initiator gaining as much success as possible without using the ultimate tool (in this instance, suit brought by the Office of the Attorney General of Alabama).

A primary purpose of assertiveness is to increase and encourage further dialog. Practically speaking, the child will receive more empathic help from school officials who are on speaking terms with the child's parents. However, when dialog is not possible, then parents have a right and a duty to resort to legal protection under the law.

Some parents may be so angry and discouraged after months or years of being frustrated, that they either withdraw and seethe (non-assertive behavior) or go for the jugular vein (aggressive behavior). The peskiest fly can be disposed of with something less lethal than a shotgun, however, and responsible assertive behavior allows parents to get what they want while maintaining their integrity as mature human beings. Non-assertive behavior produces regrets, ulcers, headaches and a sense of dishonesty and competition because the other party got away with something and did not acknowledge the parent's

true feelings. People often justify this behavior by mislabeling it as "being nice."

There is a great deal of confusion between the concepts of assertiveness and aggressiveness. Aggression is an emotionally charged term, especially for mothers, and is socially associated with people who are not "nice." Assertiveness is not aggression and it is appropriate to reiterate here that aggression simply disregards the rights and feelings of the second party. It is aggressive to be purposefully late for an appointment because that tardiness implies that our time is important while other people's time is not. It is aggressive to think and act for someone else, to deny another individual the right to think and speak for him or herself and perhaps be mistaken.

Assertiveness accomodates for both person's rights and, unlike aggression or non-assertion, does not have a controllable, specific or predictable outcome. Because assertiveness opens up the possibility of continued and improved communication, it involves greater risks than does aggressiveness (pat answers and put-downs) and non-assertiveness (pacification and dishonesty).

We will examine a situation to discover some of the various dialogs which you, as a parent, could initiate with the school personnel. Remember that an assertive response will not be effective unless it is personal and fits you. Try to retain your own speech patterns and use of terms. If your interaction angers or threatens the other person, then your statements are not effective at this time.

For our purposes here, let us use the following information. Imagine that you are the parents of an 8 year old male who is currently reading at the pre-primer level. He has routine medical care, no overt medical problems such as allergies and his vision and hearing are within normal ranges. The child attends a school district which has 1 school psychologist for each 1700 students. Although testing is indicated, you feel that too much time will be lost if the child's testing is deferred the usual six month waiting period. You cannot afford the expense of private testing. How should you procede with school officials to request that your son's testing be done during the next six weeks?

Think about the situation in these terms: Who are the participants? _____ What power roles do these participants represent? _____

How are these participants alike? _____

How do they differ? _____

Does the difference in educational level intimidate you as a parent? _____

Who should be the conference initiator? _____

Would being the initiator decrease your defensiveness? _____ What immediate results (short term goals) do you desire? _____ What long range goals, such as continued cooperation, do you expect from this interaction? _____

_____

_____

_____

As humans, we each have at least a minimal degrees of investment in other people. When others rights are violated, so are ours. Decide how well you know the official (s) from whom you seek help. What is your degree of investment with that person (s).. What investment can you assume that other person has in your child.

1. Degree of Investment:

   stranger
   acquaintance
   friend
   authority figure
   Other

   Rights:

   courtesy
   courtesy + _____
   courtesy + _____
   courtesy + _____

Each of these people also has the right to be mistaken, to refuse your request, to continue to disagree with you. Authority figures generally by their role call forth feelings of respect for the position, if not the person, and there is an expectation that the authority will have the final word. That need not be the case.

2. Degree of Investment:	Rights:
Describe yourself here	courtesy + _____

You also have the right to be mistaken but if you have done your homework and know the laws related to special education, you need not start off in the wrong.

3. Degree of Investment:	Rights:
Describe your child here	courtesy + an education + _____ (read and re-read the Alabama Developmental Disability Advocacy Program papers or similar information)

Remember that all assertive responses are personal and should fit you, no one else. This type of communication does not insure success except in how you feel about yourself later. Effective assertiveness has occured when you do not rehash the interaction and think of things you should have said or plan to say "next time."

Use our example of the 8 year old who in your opinion needs immediate testing and write your lowest level assertive request or statement to the school official. Always start at this level, then accellerate if necessary.

Low level assertive response: (Example) I would like

Sometimes your lowest level of assertiveness will not be heard; people do not always listen to each other, or understand each other's terminology.

Try again. Write a medium level response. This response may include what is called an empathic statement. An empathic statement tells the other person you understand his or her position and feelings while restating and maintaining your original position.

Medium level assertive response: (Example) I would like _____ _____ and I know you may not agree.

If neither lower level statements are heeded or are heard but ignored, move to a high level assertive statement which may be empathic

and assertive but will contain a statement of an action you intend to and will take. Please, no empty threats.

High level assertive response. (Example) I would like _____ _____ and I know you may not agree. I am willing to have both of us discuss this with the principal of the school.

Go back and check your assertive statements to see that you are 1) stating your case as clearly as possible, 2) remaining within your rights as you see them. Try comments to encourage and increase the dialog between you and the other person. One way to check for effectiveness is to practice statements with a neighbor.

Be mindful of how you would respond if someone made these statements to you. If your statements close off the other person then they are somehow aggressive or unclear. In that instance, back to the drawing board. Your long range goal is to help your child be all that he or she can be in the least restrictive environment. Assertiveness may be the least restrictive approach to communication among parents and educators.

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Lange, Arthur J. and Jakobowski, Patricia. Responsible Assertive Behavior, Research Press. Champaign, IL, 1977.

APPENDICES

1. Alabama Exceptional Child Education Act Public Law 94-142, 1973 Rehabilitation Amendment, Section 504.
2. The Right to Education in Alabama
3. Parents: How to Stand Up For Your Child
4. Steps to Evaluation and Placement
5. Due Process Hearing
6. Steps In Developing Individual Education Programs.